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Olwyn Hughes - Literary agent and sister of the poet Ted Hughes who guarded his work and the legacy of Sylvia Plath

Olwyn Hughes, literary agent, was born on August 26, 1928. She died of cancer on January 3, 2016, aged 87. After Plath's death, she left her job in Paris to raise their children

Valerie Grove.

Olwyn Hughes was a 20th-century Dorothy Wordsworth: a tall, striking, chain-smoking, plainspoken Yorkshirewoman who would "interpose her body to shield her brother from gunfire". Ted Hughes, like William Wordsworth, could rely on his sister to be his guardian and support for life. He depended on her literary judgment and business acumen, and appreciated the parallel with the Wordsworths.

Born two years before Ted and raised like him on the wuthering moors of the West Riding, Olwyn was just ahead of him in their grammar school; she was his reading guide and poetry mentor, and they worked on the school magazine together. She grew up to become his implacable gatekeeper. While his irresistible sexual magnetism led him more than once into tragedy and its aftermath, Olwyn was his confidante. "I was the only person who could have helped her," he wrote to his sister in self-reproach after Sylvia Plath's suicide, "but could not recognise when she really needed it." Yet he had also confided earlier to Olwyn that his wife had changed and was becoming "much more like her mother, whom I detest".

When Plath first set eyes on her husband's sister in 1957, she found her "startlingly beautiful, with amber-gold hair and eyes", but was critical of Olwyn's squandering money on cigarettes, especially when she owed Ted £50. The sisters-in-law were soon at daggers drawn; at a family Christmas, Olwyn found Plath "intolerant, selfish and immature" and called her a "nasty bitch". They never saw each other again.

They only ever met half a dozen times, the irony being that after Plath's death, Ted made Olwyn literary agent for her estate so "she spent the next 50 years thinking, talking and writing about Sylvia". The re-hashing of the Hughes and Plath story since then has been both a minefield and a goldmine. As Plath biographers became the bane of Ted's life, Olwyn Hughes emerged as the most formidable of archival custodians.

Olwyn Margaret (or Marguerite) Hughes was born in 1928 in Mytholmroyd, the middle child of William and Edith Hughes. Their father was a carpenter, but when Ted was seven they bought a newsagents shop in Mexborough. Olwyn went on to Queen Mary College, London, and read English Literature. Then armed with a Pitman shorthand diploma, she worked briefly on a trade magazine, but, in 1952, she left for a still war-scarred Paris to be a secretary, first at the British embassy, then with the UN, and finally a theatrical agency, loving the vibrant Left Bank culture.

So it was a measure of her sisterly devotion that, having received Ted's letter to say that Sylvia had gassed herself and later that he was struggling to cope with the two infants under three, she sacrificed the glamorous bohemian life in Paris and moved to Court Green, Ted's house in Devon, to be surrogate mother to Frieda and Nicholas.

Ted had already warned her that rural Devon was "like an old people's home". The children were not told that she was in fact their aunt until Frieda was five, and they loved her and she them. By this time, Olwyn had found a solution to domestic boredom: she took over Ted's contracts, since she knew all about them from the Paris agency. At this stage, Ted had no idea that a contract could be negotiated. She tore up his acceptance of a one-off payment for editing Keith Douglas's poems and writing an introduction, and fixed a royalty.

Having got the taste for setting up a literary agency, she made her escape to London while Ted was with his new love, Assia Wevill, in Ireland, with the children and Assia's new baby daughter. In 1969, Assia followed Sylvia in committing suicide, taking with her their young daughter, Shura.

Frieda and Nicholas were sent away to various schools and for the rest of their lives - Nicholas took his own life after the death of his soulmate-father in 1998 - they knew Olwyn as a difficult, abrasive woman. She was a terror behind the wheel; in restaurants she would send for the manager; she reacted fiercely to people, sometimes punching them for their political views, and seemed not to realise that people disliked being sworn at.

When she first met Carol Orchard, the farmer's daughter and nurse who became Ted's second wife, she challenged the pretty but silent young guest at the table: "And what do you have to say for yourself?" whereupon Carol fainted. (Ted carried her into the garden, and fell in love.) In her flamekeeping role regarding Ted's reputation, much trashed when the Plath/Hughes industry had got underway, Olwyn was militantly protective. Together, she and Ted appointed Judith Kroll to edit Sylvia's letters. Whenever a draft manuscript was sent to her, she was swift to correct "egregious factual errors, outrageously dramatised versions of events, novelettishly sensationalised portraits" in a typical catalogue of complaints to the would-be biographer. On the whole, Ted left the battles to her, in a "good cop/ bad cop" scenario: he could rely on her "strange fierceness" to make supplicants quake. She was toweringly skilled in contempt and sarcasm; she wrote letters to editors. He let her weigh in whenever "the lunatic fringe of women's lib" gave cry. She hated feminists, "these silly women and their hysterias", their harping on Ted's infidelities, and their desecrations of Sylvia's grave, chiselling away at the name "Hughes".

Having authorised a biography of Sylvia by the American poet and author Anne Stevenson, Olwyn interfered relentlessly, and when *Bitter Fame* was published in 1989 it carried a warning that Olwyn's participation made the book almost a work of dual authorship. Their protracted mortal combat over the book - Stevenson determined to work alone, Olwyn maintaining her iron grip - became the subject of Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman*, a classic and riveting pathology of biography.

She made a brief and disastrous marriage in 1979 to an Irishman, Richard Thomas, whom she kept while he dried out. He returned to drinking, however, and proved to be a bully, pawned her jewels and gashed his wrists. The marriage lasted six months; Ted helped her to prepare her divorce papers. Brother and sister always did what they needed to do for one another, and if he found her inescapable, he was tolerant. Her inspiration was to create a new imprint, Rainbow Press, to publish expensively bound and cased limited editions, with fine typography, etchings and watercolour illustrations of Ted's work. And she was at his deathbed with his son, daughter, and wife, Carol.

Her small band of clients, who for a time included the novelist Jean Rhys and the poet Elaine Feinstein, author of the first Hughes biography, appreciated her hospitality. Though the friendship with Feinstein ended, "I still feel warmly towards her", Feinstein said.

Olwyn once gave Craig Raine an LP of Plath's poetry: alas, her cigarette had burned through the cover and melted it. Yet he admired her fine understanding of poetry. Emma Tennant, one of Ted's lovers, appealing to Olwyn in 1975 for something by Ted for her new magazine Bananas, could see "quick flashes of charm under a harassed exterior". The last person to interview Olwyn, Sam Jordison of *The Guardian* in 2013, wrote up her words exactly as she had spoken - at her mocking insistence - and prefaced them with: "In spite of the force of many of her words, I found her goodhumoured and peculiarly charming. You must imagine the following spoken in a warm Yorkshire accent."

Even Anne Stevenson, whose experience of writing with Olwyn on her back was such a torment, was moved to say: "The tragedy of Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and Nicholas Hughes is completed with the tragedy of Olwyn. Everything is forgiven. I couldn't have written *Bitter Fame* without her - or with her, but somehow it got written. So thank you, Olwyn." Sir Jonathan Bate, the latest biographer of Ted Hughes, was also grateful. When the Hughes estate withdrew its support from Bate's book and Faber cancelled his contract (after four years' "immersion" in Hughes' work and life), Olwyn initially sided with the widow, Carol Hughes, who runs the estate. Later, though, Olwyn got back to Bate and restored her full co-operation.

In the end, her niece Frieda - a poet and artist who still resembles her mother Sylvia Plath - was the only family member left to organise the care for her aunt. Olwyn grew old badly: she got into many scrapes, and her house burned down. Even then, she could not resist pouring scorn on Frieda's new qualification as a bereavement counsellor. "Why do you want to help other people? Help yourself. That's enough."

Olwyn, who had dementia, died in a nursing home in Staines. She is survived by her eldest brother, Gerald, who is 97. She never did give up smoking.